

A SURVEY OF LONDON.

SIR WALTER BESANT'S GREAT WORK
AND HOW HE IS DOING IT.

London, December 26.

In these days of diplomatic controversy and war alarm it is refreshing to seek the retirement of a literary workshop, where peace and quiet are unbroken by contention over boundary claims and the bearings of the Monroe Doctrine. Sir Walter Besant spends his days in comfortable working rooms, provided for his use by the Blacks in their publishing-house in Soho Square. It is a retired and quiet corner of London, where literary work can be done without interruption or distraction; and Sir Walter Besant is to be seen here at 9 o'clock in the morning, bent upon making a full day of it. He rises early, takes a light breakfast, and is at the desk down before the majority of his literary associates have stirred in their beds; and he remains there the greater part of the day, allowing himself only a brief half-hour for luncheon. Few authors are equally methodical and systematic in their habits of labor. He has robust health, and thrives under a pressure of exhausting study and investigation which would paralyze and disable an ordinary literary workman.

There are three things in which this workman author is interested. One is fiction, to which he has contributed many characteristic and wholesome stories. Another is the Authors' Society, which he has converted into a powerful league for upholding the dignity and rights of men of letters. The third is London, its past and present, which he knows perhaps more intimately than any other Englishman. He has not abandoned novel-writing altogether, although he has now no important work in hand and only two or three short stories for future delivery; and he is always ready to fight the battle of the unknown or the inexperienced author, and to defend his best ally, the literary agent. But he has been chiefly occupied for a year in what promises to be a comprehensive encyclopedia of London. Perhaps one-fourth of his work is done—certainly he does not expect to finish it before the close of 1898; but his whole heart is in it, and like Jacob's service, the years will seem like days because he loves his present occupation.

AN EARLY ACCOUNT.

In 1598 there was published a "Survey of London" by a painstaking investigator named Stow, who described the old town when it was hardly larger than what is now technically known as the City. In 1720 a new edition of this work was prepared by Styrpe, who enlarged its scope and revised the text so as to make it an accurate exhibit of London as it was early in the eighteenth century. Thirty years afterward another edition was published, with additions and corrections, which brought the work up to date. From that time no attempt has been made to carry on the Survey of London. Meanwhile, it has become the largest city of the world, with a population of 4,500,000 in what is known as London of the County Council, and 6,500,000 in the London of the metropolitan police district. What Sir Walter Besant has undertaken to do is to take up the survey where Stow and Styrpe left it, and to complete it to the end of the century. It is a work of tremendous magnitude, for London is now a system of worlds, crossing orbits and revolving about one another. Only an indefatigable worker, who loved the work for its own sake, would have attempted so vast and complex an undertaking.

It is most interesting to hear Sir Walter Besant explain his methods of investigation and plan of operations. He begins by producing the three Surveys which have been previously published, and then illustrates by a series of large maps the growth of London since the days of Stow and Styrpe, his predecessors of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Fascinating indeed is the study of these old pictorial charts to one who knows anything of London as it is today, so marvellous are the changes which have been wrought. London as it was in 1543 and 1600, with the single bridge leading to St. Paul's, and the hamlet across the Thames, and with the old St. Paul's Cathedral looming up in the centre, and with open fields and empty spaces leading to what was then the separate city of Westminster, was only an insignificant fraction of what is now an imperial metropolis. Another map, made eight years before the great fire, shows the progress of a century, and enables one to determine the extent of that terrible catastrophe. Later charts present the London of the second and third Surveys, and the increased magnitude of Styrpe's enterprise. Then Sir Walter Besant points significantly to an enormous map of London as it is administered by the County Council, and smiles grimly as he contemplates the vast proportions of the labor which he has undertaken.

In addition to all the ancient and modern maps of London, he has in his working rooms a library of 700 volumes, relating exclusively to the subject. These are on shelves where he can readily consult them, and the completion of the Survey involves an exhaustive comparison of authors of various periods and a comprehensive study of this tremendous mass of literature. During the last thirty years specialists have been at work in countless branches of the subject, and immense additions have been made to the stock of knowledge of this wonderful town. To illustrate this point, Sir Walter took from the shelves at random several recent works of great learning and research, one of them Dr. Sharpe's "Calendar" of Wills of Notable Citizens of London from the earliest times. The new Survey will embody the results of a thoroughly digested study of the literature of these specialists, who have been working in narrow and restricted fields of their own.

NEW DISCOVERIES.

Not only have books been written about London by the hundred during recent years, but discoveries are constantly making. Only a few years ago the crypt of the old White Friars Church was identified near Fleet-st. When the religious orders were dissolved in 1540, the structure was pulled down and the site was built up, and apparently there was not a vestige of the famous house; but in an old cellar a doorway was accidentally discovered, and antiquarians have found no difficulty in identifying the crypt of the monastic church. Sir Walter told me another story which was even fresher and more interesting. He had accompanied Mr. Loftie, the archaeologist, a few days before to the official residence of the First Lord of the Treasury, and had discovered the original walls of Cardinal Wolsey's treasury. York House, near Westminster, was enlarged by the Cardinal. On one side of what is now Whitehall was the famous palace with the banqueting hall, and on the other was the Tilt Yard, where the Horse Guards and the Home Office now stand; and a little to the South was the Cardinal's treasury. Portions of the walls of that treasury still form the foundations of Mr. Balfour's official residence.

The new Survey of London will open with an account of the prehistoric city and its first inhabitants. Then will follow sections on Roman, Saxon and mediæval London. The work has been completed to this point by Sir Walter Besant himself after a year's unremitting labor. The historical survey will proceed with Tudor, Stuart and eighteenth century London, and will be rounded out to the close of the present century. All these parts will be written by him, but the remainder of the work will be prepared by specialists and edited by him. When the history of the metropolis has been told, a minute account will be given of the remains and vestiges of different periods as seen to-day anywhere within twenty miles of Charing Cross.

For this purpose every street is visited, and every old house explored in the wards and in the suburbs. Sir Walter describes this process as "the perambulation of London," and expects to obtain through his staff a great mass of information bearing upon the past of London as it is revealed to-day in old buildings, mansions and walls. Successive portions of the work will be occupied with an exhaustive description of the government of London, the Houses of Parliament, Imperial Buildings, the churches, schools, prisons, courts, markets, docks, parks, libraries, art galleries, theatres and other institutions; society as it is known to-day, and memorials of worthy citizens.

SIR WALTER'S CHIEF WORK.

Sir Walter speaks of this great undertaking with enthusiasm as the chief work of his life. It will be an encyclopædia in a dozen royal quarto volumes, of 600 pages each, with 1,000 illustrations. Two volumes are now finished in manuscript, and by the end of another year the first series of four will be published. With a staff of fifty contributors the entire undertaking will be completed in two subsequent years. It promises to be a monumental literary work worthy of the capital of the modern world. It is not strange that the director of so vast an enterprise rises early and contents himself with a rapid luncheon in a quiet corner. He has no time to spare for lounging in clubs or gossiping with visitors. The winter days are short and he needs every available hour of daylight for his work. Fortunately he is a strong, robust man, with unimpaired health, or he would break down under the tremendous pressure of his self-imposed task. As it is, he plods along day by day, with a smile on his genial, pleasant face, a fine glow of color in his cheeks, and a forehead without a wrinkle. A rapid talker, with a hearty, attractive manner, he is direct, practical and businesslike—a workman in literature, I had almost said. "Yes, I ought to know how to work by this time," he will say with a smile, stroking his long shaggy beard, which probably he never finds time to have trimmed. He is sometimes described as the best-hated author among publishers, but that can hardly be true. So sincere, loyal and high-minded a man cannot have enemies.

HE ANNOYS MR. DEPEW.

WHEN NOT CLAIMING RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, HE POSSES AS A RELATIVE OF THE VANDERBILTS.

There is some one who is causing a great deal of trouble for Chauncey M. Depew and the members of the Vanderbilt family. It may be more than one individual, as Mr. Depew has never seen his tormentor, but the various experiences of this interesting person tell so closely that Mr. Depew is inclined to think that this man, who claims relationship with him, is concerned in all of the escapades.

The latest story comes from Bangor, and when a friend of Mr. Depew's was reading an account of it with great interest. He said: "There is a nice story. Last Friday morning a train rolled into the station at Bangor. Attached to it was a private Pullman car, in which was a man who had since made it interesting in that neighborhood. He had a friend with him. They went to the hotel, hired the best suites of rooms and proposed that a private room be set aside for them during the night. They paid for the private car and proposed a willingness to buy the train, if necessary, to insure privacy. The first thing they did was to deposit over \$3,000 in the safe of the hotel. Then they drove to the bank and hauled out bills in wads until \$2,000 more was to their credit. This fellow gave the hotel manager a check for \$5,000, and his friend was a college man from Harvard, known as Smith. Mills told the bank officials that he was a brother-in-law of Cornelius Vanderbilt, and that he wanted to change small bills into large ones, and that he would like to have a check for \$5,000, and his friend was a college man from Harvard, known as Smith. Mills told the bank officials that he was a brother-in-law of Cornelius Vanderbilt, and that he wanted to change small bills into large ones, and that he would like to have a check for \$5,000, and his friend was a college man from Harvard, known as Smith. Mills told the bank officials that he was a brother-in-law of Cornelius Vanderbilt, and that he wanted to change small bills into large ones, and that he would like to have a check for \$5,000, and his friend was a college man from Harvard, known as Smith. 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